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ABSTRACT

According to S. K. Langer, people create meaning through presentational and discursive symbolism. Presentational symbolism, Langer suggests, is an abstracted sense of experienced life, while discursive symbolism is a series of subordinating or coordinating positions that set in motion the relation of ideas and permits the discussion of causation. Langer's influence is evident in J. Britton's emphasis on human symbolmaking activities and J. Kinneavy's view of discourse theory. Neither, however, give as much importance as Langer to presentational symbolism. In stressing that language can transmit form nonlinearly, Langer brings romantic and classical approaches to language into a coherent relationship. When writers are able to fuse presentational and discursive forms, they transform the reader's sense of reality, fusing art and knowledge. Langer's ideas shed new light on composition theories. (MM)

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On Making the I Universal: From Langer to Britton to Kinneavy

by
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&
Judith Kirscht

Whenever we read passages that are suffused with their authors' inner sense of things, when we feel our knowledge expand, and are transformed, we know that those authors, because they have transformed us, have achieved mastery, that language, idea, and imagination have fused. We have termed this fusion and the consequent transformation, within author and reader, the moment the I becomes universal, and believe the symbolmaking capacities of man lie at its heart. It is the compulsion of man to make symbols, to form and transform experience in this way that is the central concern of Susan Langer, and we have found her work exciting not only because she gives form and meaning to such experiences, to our inarticulate sense of mastery, but also because her conceptualization and explication of the symbolmaking process itself illuminates our various theories of writing, both as composition and art, and brings them into a new, coherent relationship with each other and with the formation of knowledge itself.

For Langer, it is the compulsion to engage in symbolmaking that defines man, and his ability to abstract from the immediate present, through use of symbols, that separates him from the lower animals. By symbols, auditory, linguistic, and visual, man makes meaning, and gives form to all of life, the internal matters of feeling and desire, the intangible events of love and death, and the tangible events of the physical world. Inquiry, for Langer, centers not on the discovery of external truth, but on the way humans establish relationships between internal and external, the way they bring the two into equilibrium.

That we do so by making meaning is to belabor the obvious, but we use the word "meaning" in many poorly distinguished ways. Langer separates several such usages, of which we think two are important here. The first, which she calls signification, is the sort of conditioned response to present stimuli that we share with the lower animals and does not involve symbolization.

See Figure 1

If you salivate at the sound of the dinner bell, stop your car at a red hexagon, or turn around when I call "John!", you are responding to present signs with learned "meaning" without benefit of symbol. The purpose of "signing" is to evoke action in the immediate situation. The moment you carry that red hexagon away in your head, however, the moment the name John brings a face to mind, you have moved into another realm of meaning -- that of symbolization. This is the activity that enables you to talk about the object in its absence without reference to action. Such symbols allow you to identify objects, but they also do much more, for they do not remain in isolation; they combine, each bringing a fragment of meaning to the whole and transforming the whole by its presence, and it is this, conceptualization that is Langer's chief concern.

This activity, according to Langer, this giving of form, occurs with visual, auditory, as well as linguistic symbols, and here she makes her second chief distinction in the use of the word "meaning." The first kind of symbolization, which she calls presentational, expresses feelings and desires; it is not the language of grunts and sighs, but rather our abstracted sense of experienced life. Langer postulates that such cannot be expressed in linear discourse, that it operates by simultaneous recognition. Talking about such experience does not transmit it, presentational symbolism does.

Here, for example, is one of Rudolph Arnheim's student's diagram of a good and bad marriage:

See Figure 2

Your response demonstrates your capacity to abstract and give form to highly complex emotional constellations. Such constellations constantly recombine, without benefit of discourse,into new abstractions, new concepts, and to take these abstractions and reincarnate them into external form is, according to Langer, art. The external realities of the work, the sounds of music, the shapes and colors on the canvas, the characters and trees in the novel, the images in poetry, are vehicles for the non-linear conception, not reproductions of reality itself and exist only to express the meaning, the felt but inexpressible significance of an event.

William Blake's poem,"A Poison Tree" expresses the complex issue

See Figure 3

of jealousy. In the poem, the tree becomes the objective correlative, the concrete noun which expresses a complex of presentational symbols, each with its own connotation, and each connotation contributing to the whole. The apple conjures up the temptation of Adam and Eve, the smiles the hypocrisy of mankind, the tears the frustration, the fears provide the driving force of the action and the tree interweaves them all. Indeed the poem by Blake is particularly appropriate because it shows, in effect,how symbols, how smiles, wiles, trees etc. can be tranformed into new meaning. In the end,the tension between the glee of victory and the metaphorical murder of an enemy is suspended, the writer makes no judgments, he simply expresses life.

In the poem by Blake, the purpose and use of presentational symbols is very clear. In the writing of our students, however,we

can see such presentational activity emerging in writing not intended as creative. When a group of our students were sent to respond in writing to a scene at a local shopping mall, for example, the majority simply recorded and reacted to what was going on around them. This student, however, clearly did something more:

See Figure 4

He has used the mall fountain, with its pennies, to express his cynicism, to give form to an attitude or stance he doesn't like. Once you have received the effect it no longer matters whether there is or ever was a fountain there, a security guard or an information desk. Their only function as they are placed in this example is to give form to feeling.

If we wish, however, to talk about that meaning,or about the real fountain, we must move into the second form of symbolization -- the discursive. Unlike presentational symbolism, which tends to contain concurrent and recurrent images and themes, discursive symbolism is linear. Each noun or concept must be set into a series of subordinating or coordinating positions which sets in motion the relation of ideas. Such language refers directly to the external reality and enables us to talk about causation, change over time, activity. Here is the same student explaining his metaphor,

See Figure 5

and here we see him refering to his feeling, its cause, and to the real scene around him -- dealing directly with reality in a linear fashion, making logical, explicit connections. This is the language with which we analyze our conceptions, form and reform our relationship with the world. This is discursive symbolism.

The obvious question that arises from the above is whether a piece of discourse can be discursive and presentational at the

same time, whether while explicating concepts it can transmit feeling, presentationally. Susan Langer would answer yes to this, and would term it applied art. We would go further and say when they do so fuse, and are in harmony with each other, each reinforcing the meaning of the other, the result is mastery:

See Figure 6

This is the fusion we think has the power to transform our sense of reality, because we feel the author's sense of being enlivened by her sense of the universe.

Such a duality is exciting, to us, for it suggests that writers, students and professional, should develop the presentational as well as the discursive craft. Work in the presentational heightens ones sense of the distinction between the two forms of experience and analysis and increases ones sensitivity to the connotative power of words, develops an inner sense of the intricacy of relationships, and makes clear that we discover the inner workings of our concepts, in any field, as we struggle to form them on paper. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it brings language as art and language as discourse into cohesive harmonious relationship, making them both integral parts of the act of "knowing."

We have also found that this reunion, plus the refocusing of attention on the function of language making in the knower, sheds new light on our various composiiton theories, and brings them into new relationships. Despite Langer's emphasis on the knower, it is those most interested in the communication function of language, the discourse theorists, who seem to have been most heavily influenced by Langer herself. Britton drew many elements of his theory from her and cites her liberally. His studies of language develop-

ment in the child certainly agree resoundingly with Langer, for he identifies the moment, somewhere around a year, when children develop the ability to carry concepts in absence of the external referent, that act that separates them forever from the lower animals, as well as the moment, in adolescence, when they develop the ability to play with and transform relationships in the abstract, without referent experience. The Langer influence also explains his strong emphasis on play to encourage symbolmaking, the immersion in imagined experience in order to draw meaning, form concepts. Finally Britton also makes Langer's key distinction between presentational and discursive language when he distinguishes between spectator and participant use. When one tells a story, both teller and listener are spectators, but if one is using language to get something done in the external world, one is using it as participant.

These terms reflect the social-interactive emphasis of Britton's approach rather than Langer's epistimological one, and perhaps this emphasis comes from Britton's primary interest in language development. It also, perhaps, explains why it is the discourse theorists, such as Kinneavy, who draw so heavily on Britton who bear the marks of Langer's presence.

See Figure 7

Kinneavy's pyramid, his diagramatic model of the purposes of discourse, postulates that all purposes, expressive, referential, and literary are present, to some degree in every piece of discourse. If we substitute the knower, the concept maker, in the center of the pyramid, rather than the purpose of the discourse, we would of course, expect all forms to be present. In Kinneavy's expressive function, we find Langer's basic compulsion to express, to symbolize, to make language. For both Britton and Langer this function is primary, preceding all

others, while Kinneavy's model presents it simply as one among many possible purposes. Kinneavy's referential discourse bears strong resemblence to Langer's discursive, language whose referent is external reality, and whose purpose is transactional; like Britton participant, this is language designed to get something done. His literary category, however, which he defines as playing with language for its own sake, is the category we feel could most benefit by reunion with Langer's concept of presentational form. The idea that language has the power to transmit non-linearly, to give significant form to feeling to sensed meaning of life, is missing from Kinneavy, and its lack has been noticed by many whose inclinations are literary or poetic. Perhaps Britton, who greatly influenced Kinneavy, had already weakened this conception -- his term "spectator" does not carry the sense that the viewer or reader has participated in and been transformed by an experience; in fact, his use of the word "participant" to denote the discursive, or transactional, category would seem to rule participation out of the "spectator"function. These terms, because they only denote whether action is intended, miss the qualitative difference in the kind of knowledge being formed and transmitted, and, in fact, we think this attention solely to the social, or interactive aspect of language leads Kinneavy and other discourse theorists too far from Langer's conception of language as knowledge making.

Though Langer would not deny the importance of interaction in concept making, dialectic is as old as philosophical inquiry itself, the purpose of that interaction is understanding of the world and life; it is the transformation of the knower that is central, not the audience. Since we share Langer's view of the knower as central, this would seem to place us solidly in the Romantic, rather than

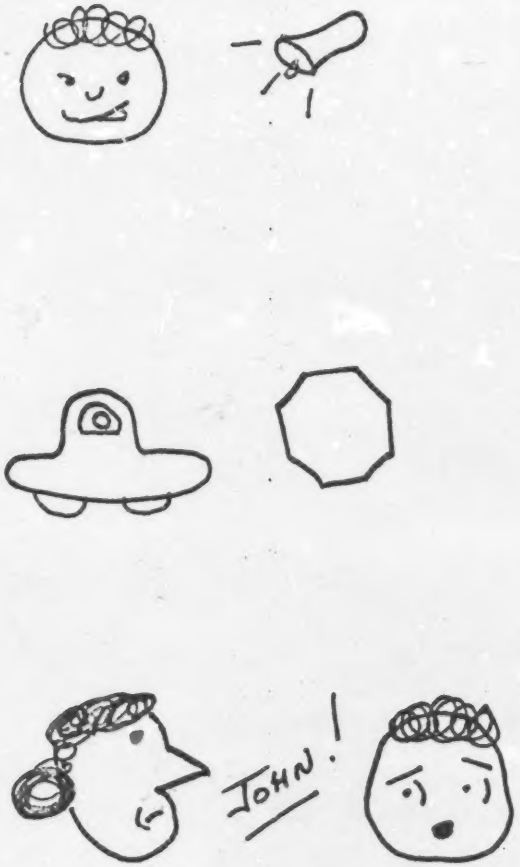
the Classical, camp of rhetoric theorists. For these -- Coles, Berthoff, Rohman, and others -- it is the formation of understanding in the writer that is central, and the aim of writing, as the aim of inquiry for Langer is not to discover "truth" externally, but to examine our perception of it.

Though we would agree that the Romantisists are far closer to Langer in their conception of the purpose of language than the Classicists, we would not, and neither do we believe would Langer, discard the Classisists' rhetorical structures and strategies of discovery. Not only do these classical forms and activities give tools for the discovery of the internal structures of our concepts and give models for possible structures, they give us known forms for transformation. When an insight calls for a modification of an existing form, when universal or communal knowledge no longer adequately expresses the perceptions of the knower, and when this knower, like the classical rhetorician is compelled by his inner sense of the form of the argument to build new connotations through different organizational pattersn or to discover new relationships between units of logical thought, then the process by which one makes new knowledge or meaning, if you like, is begun. Furthermore if, in a moment of triumph, form and content become inseparable, complete, and fused, the I becomes universal.

It is precisely the capacity of Langer's conception to bring discourse, romantic and classical theorists into coherent relationship with art and with the process of knowing that we find exciting. None of these theories, however, give cognizance of that moment of elucidation, when a new concept transforms the knower, fuses form with content, feeling with matter, and commands the pen. That we all know such moments, and recognize instantly when we are reading

such mastery, know its capacity to transform us, but that none of us can describe in discursive prose what it is we are experiencing is ample support for the existence of Langer's presentational meaning. That she gives form and reality to that experience should, we think, be enough to commend her to you as a central figure for any who deal with language.

SIGNIFICATION



SYMBOLIZATION

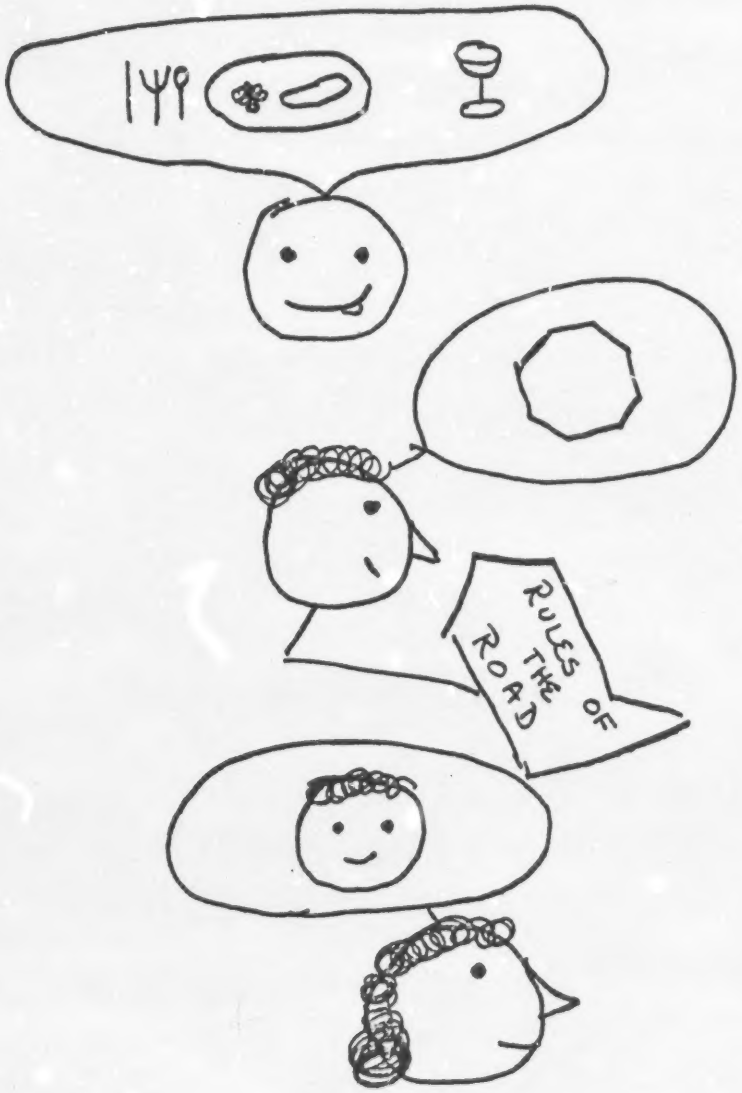


Figure 1

Figure 2

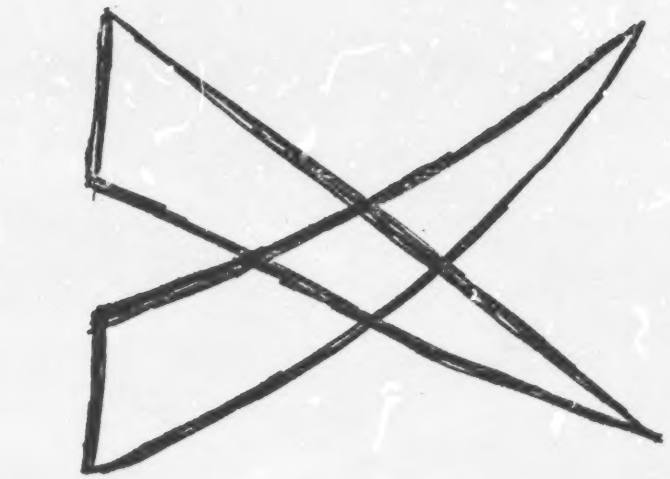


Figure 3

A Poison Tree

William Blake

I was angry with my friend.
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I water'd it in fears,
Night and morning with my tears,
And I sunned it with smiles,
And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night,
Till it bore an apple bright,
And my foe beheld it shine,
And he knew that it was mine.

And into my garden stole
When the night had veil'd the pole,
In the morning glad I see
My foe outstretch'd beneath the tree.

Figure 4

Response

So big and clean, such a grand show. A system built on and around pennies (lots) that flows so easily. The children play around the fountain and throw their pennies in. The lady at the information desk winds her clock and counts her pennies. The security guard keeps his steely eeys peeled for all those pennypinchers. Oh look! The children delight -- the janitor is pulling the pennies out of the fountain now. I can hear them tinkling.

But do I have enough pennies to be happy here? And where do I get more if I need them? These people only take pennies, they don't give them away.

The sterile "airport" type Muzak calms the nerves but masks the truth. The lady in the dark brown coat with soddy tennis shoes just doesn't have enough pennies to buy her sad-eyed child a candy bar. But what's a few pennies anyhow? Who cares about a measly few pennies? I guess I'll just window shop and let the music fog my head up and maybe if I try hard enough I'll be able to dream up all the pennies I want. Won't that be nice!

Figure 5

Meaning

I feel very cynical in the mall because of the existence of poverty and because of the intense buying atmosphere that is created (I feel), although I didn't really get to that. The pennies are supposed to represent the way this atmosphere trys to play down worry (if its just a few pennies, why worry).

Figure 6

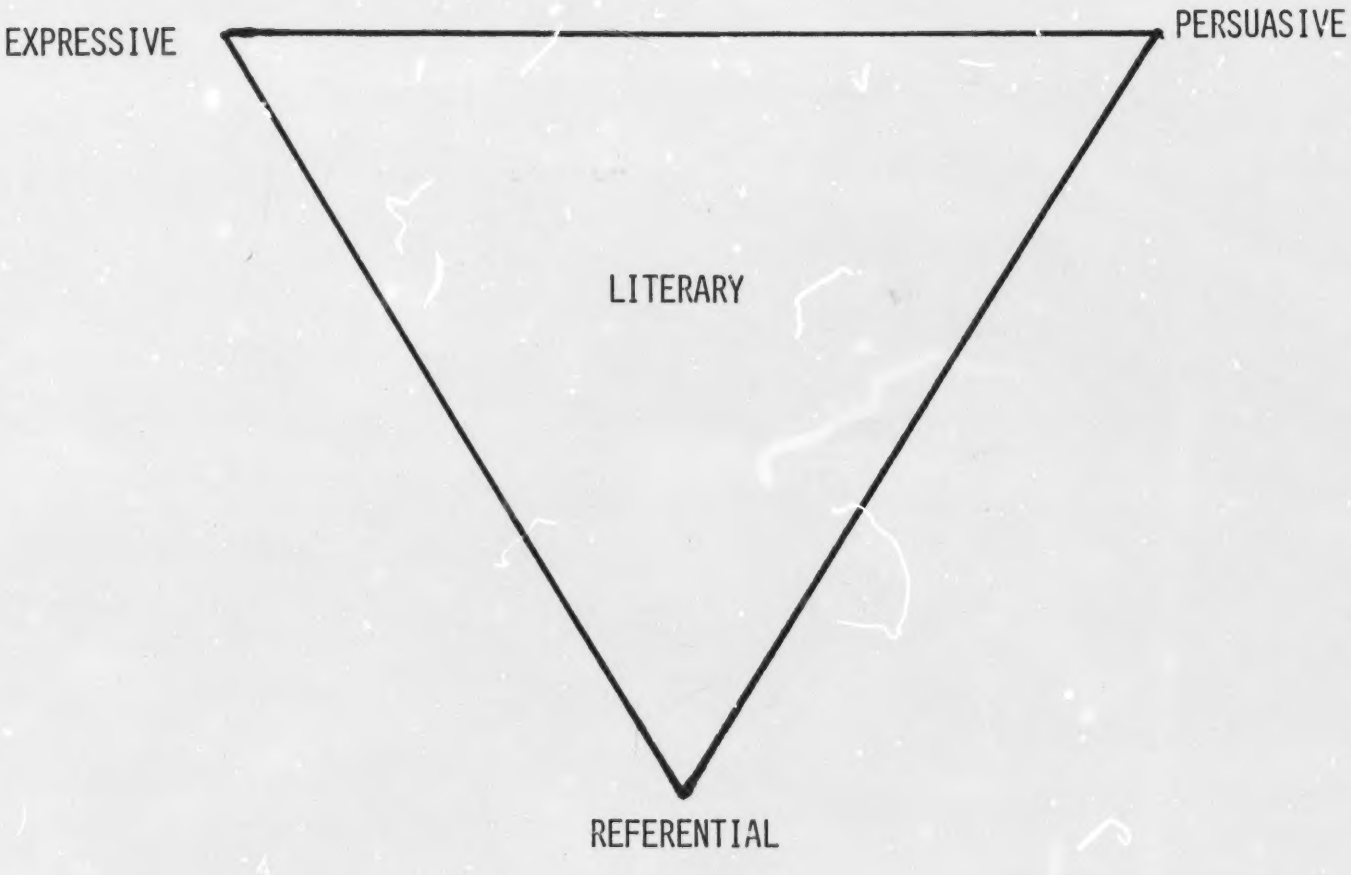
AS A THINKER I KEEP DISCOVERING THAT BEAUTY ITSELF IS AS MUCH A FACT, AND A MYSTERY, AS THE MOST GRUESOME PARASITIC ROUND-WORM. I CONSIDER NATURE'S FACTS -- ITS BEAUTIFUL AND GROTESQUE FORMS AND EVENTS -- IN TERMS OF THEIR IMPORT TO THOUGHT AND THEIR IMPETUS TO THE SPIRIT. IN NATURE I FIND GRACE TANGLED IN A RAPTURE WITH VIOLENCE, I FIND AN INTRICATE LANDSCAPE WHOSE FORMS ARE FRINGED IN DEATH, I FIND MYSTERY, NEWNESS AND A KIND OF EXHUBERANT SPENDTHRIFT ENERGY.

ANNIE DILLARD

FIGURE 7

K I N N E A V Y

THE AIMS OF DISCOURSE



SOURCE: JAMES KINNEAVY, A THEORY OF DISCOURSE, NEW YORK, NORTON, 1971, P.61.